DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 176 359 CS 502 637

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TITLE The Anglo-Saxon Boast: A Study in the Archaeology of a Speech Genre.
PUB DATE Nov 78
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 2-5, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Language Universals; Language Usage; *Medieval History; *Old English Literature; Persuasive Discourse; Politics; Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Criticism; *Speech Communication; Speeches; *Speech Habits
IDENTIFIERS *Beowulf

ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that the examination of primordial and universal genres of utterance illuminates universal principles of speaking and meaning, this paper examines the Anglo-Saxon boast, a common form of speaking among Germanic warrior societies during the early middle ages. It tells how Old English literature provides evidence from which the nature and function of the boast can be reconstructed, establishes the pervasiveness of and positive attitudes toward boasting before the entrenchment of Christianity, explains how past accomplishments were used in the boast to propel the boaster toward imminent battle crises, and documents the function of the boast as a public promise regarding future behavior, rather than as an utterance of self-praise. It next analyzes the first dramatically rendered boast in "Beowulf," showing how the boast helped Beowulf recharge his identity and grapple with the real possibility of failure and death in battle. After showing how certain contemporary rituals, including some political speeches and the preparation of "vitae" by job applicants, bear the imprint of the Anglo-Saxon boast, the paper concludes by pointing to the boast as a universal principle of discourse that permits people to organize experience by creating a usable past to give meaning and continuity to existence. (GT)

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THE ANGLO-SAXON BOAST: A STUDY IN THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF A SPEECH GENRE

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I was lost in the world, and in speaking, lo,
I become what I am. My speech commits me. I
am what I say, and every genuine word is a word
of honor. Likewise, my speech reveals me to myself,
just as it does to others: in communicating,
I thereby become myself a communicable being.

Mikel Dufrenne

Position paper for Semiotics, Speaking, and Meaning, Seminar VI, 1978 Speech Communication Association Convention, Minneapolis, Minnesota

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In recent years the focus of speech communication research has shifted from particular speech incidents to timeless speech acts. Historically insignificant discourse now commands the attention of scholars when it can be shown to illuminate universal principles of speaking and meaning. Edwin Black led the assault upon the historical subjectivism of neo-Aristotelian speech criticism with the assertion that "there is a limited number of situations in which a rhetor can find himself" and that "there will be only a finite number of rhetorical strategies available to a rhetor in any given situation."[1] Responding to Black's impetus, contemporary critics search for "recurrent forms" and are interested in "tracing traditions" and "recognizing affinities" among discourses instead of approaching speaking experiences as discrete, unique communications.[2] Kenneth Burke explains that such generalization is possible

> if only because men now have the same neural and muscular structure as men who have left their records from past ages. We and they are in much the same biological situation. Furthermore, even the concrete details of social texture have a great measure of overlap. And the nature of the human mind itself, with the function of abstraction rooted in the nature of language, also provides us with 'levels of generalization' . . . by which situations greatly different in their particularities may be felt to belong in the same class. . . .[3]

Yet with all our overarching theories and pronouncements about "enduring rhetorical forms" and "archetypal structures," there has been little discovery and identification of genres of utterance that seem truly primordial and universal. To be sure, critics have grouped discourses into genres and "rhetorics of," but seldom do the examples cut across cultural boundaries or span even a century.[4] Rhetorical archaeology, the reconstruction and recovery of distinct configurations of speaking and meaning from our more distant past, will provide valuable evidence for testing the accountability of our present-day theories about <u>homo loquens</u>, the creature who speaks.

The Anglo-Saxon boast, ostensibly a speech of self-praise, was a common

form of speaking among Germanic warrior societies during the early middle ages (fifth through at least tenth centuries). Predating the invention of printing press and tape recorder, Anglo-Saxon culture has left us no transcripts of actual boasts uttered by historical persons. Nevertheless, Old English literature (the largest extant body of early medieval literature of the western world) provides much evidence from which we can reconstruct the nature and function of this intriguing type of utterance. We know from the literature that Anglo-Saxon culture stressed the importance of speech in formal situations and that the boast was perhaps the most popular public speaking event. Old English has two words for boast, beot and gilp, which occur frequently throughout the literature. The fact that a philological study of these two words was reprinted in Essential Articles for the Study of Old English Poetry attests to the importance of their common referent.[4a] Furthermore, when characters in the literature make mention of the speech custom they point to its popularity with lines like "remember the many times when we, warriors in the meadhall, often brandished our boasts" (see Beowulf 480-481, 2633-2637; Maldon 212-214[5]).

In keeping with its widespread practice, boasting was well received by the contemporary Anglo-Saxon audience. Without exception in the heroic poetry boasting has positive connotations through its association with heroes and praiseworthy men. Beowulf, the greatest hero in Old English literature, uttered seven boasts; the monsters, on the other hand, did not dignify their actions with speech, and the poet made the point that the unattractive Unferth did not boast (980-981). In the Battle of Maldon, the second longest Old English epic, the idealized heroes to a man uttered boasts; the evil vikings, however, were conspicuously silent. Lest there be any doubt about the social reception of this custom, the poet explicitly tells us after Beowulf uttered

his third boast, "Then was the speech, the boastwords of the Geat, well-pleasing to Wealhþeow, the gracious queen" (639-641). We must disabuse ourselves, therefore, of the modern pejorative connotations of boast.

The modern association of boast with negative forms of pride semantically pollutes the term. This drastic reversal in the affective meaning of a word, which should be of great interest to semioticians, began during the late Anglo-Saxon period with the arrival of Christian missionaries.[6] Alongside the essentially Germanic, heroic literature, there was a body of Old English didactic Christian literature: saints' lives, homilies, Old Testament narratives. In the latter group, the words beot and gilp accrued negative connotations. Indeed, the Benedictine abbot Ælfric, a contemporary of the Maldon poet, listed "gilpen" as one of the deadly sins.[7] This radical switch in meaning of the words beot and gilp epitomizes the most distinctive feature of Anglo-Saxon culture: the confrontation between Germanic heroic and Christian values. Even in expressly Christian materials, however, the older meaning of the words sometimes prevailed, as when the Anglo-Saxon translator of Genesis rendered God's promis of a son to Abraham as a "wordbeot" (2762b-2763a).

Having established the pervasiveness of and positive attitudes toward boasting (at least before the entrenchment of Christianity), we now need to look at how "the subjective constituents of meaning took special shape" in this distinctive form of speaking. The boast's strategic use of time is crucial to a proper understanding of its meaning. Boasts were usually uttered on the eve of battle, although sometimes they were shouted forth immediately before charging into combat, or even in the thick of the fight. The point is, boasts were uttered in expectation of and preparation for crisis, great moments of truth in a warrior's experience. Even though the most striking (and to the modern ear sometimes offensive) feature of the boast was the strong assertion of self through reciting of past exploits, the boast was essentially future

directed. Past accomplishments were used as a stabilizing ground against which to brace oneself and face the uncertain, often grim, future. More than a ground, the recollection of past heroics became a springboard which constrained, impelled the warrior to attempt yet more daring deeds of valor. Through this self-defining utterance, the boaster traced a trajectory, a personal eschatology which led him directly to the forthcoming moment of truth.[8] Every "I did" carried with it an implicit "I must continue to do" and functioned as an imperative for future conduct. The terrifying, unknown future was controlled and given significance by anchoring it in the security of the past, and former deeds of glory were revived in future acts. Ulysses' speech to Achilles in Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida eloquently explains the notion of time which informed boasts:

> Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,
> Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,
> A great-siz'd monster of ingratitudes.
> Those scraps are good deeds past, which are devour'd
> As fast as they are made, forgot as soon
> As done. Perseverance, dear my lord,
> Keeps honor bright; to have done is to hang
> Quite out of fashion, like a rusty mail
> In monumental mock'ry.[8a] III.iii. 145-153.

With this understanding of how the past functioned to propel the boaster towards future tests, we must reassess the view of the boast as a constative utterance of self-praise, a listing of personal information which can be affirmed or denied.[9] Instead, the boast was a performative utterance with the illocutionary force of promising. Many boasts contained explicit illocutionary force indicators[10] such as "I will," "I promise you that," "I shall never," etc. The Anglo-Saxon boast is a good example of those "many utterances," Austin observed, "which look like statements [but] are either not intended at all, or only intended in part, to record or impart straightforward information about the facts."[11] Instead, the boast was an utterance designed "for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct."[12] When a warrior boasted he was not simply saying good things about himself, but doing something, taking upon himself an obligation, a pledge to perform according to the signposts of his past. Failure

to understand that the meaning of a boast was determined by what it did, not said, explains why many modern students and even some literary critics react to boasts in the same way one responds to vainglory and hollow braggadocio.

That the public pledge constituted by the utterance of a boast was taken seriously and sealed by the witnessing audience, is reinforced in Old English literature by the formula "gilp gelæsted" or "beot gelæsted" (see Beowulf 523-524, 829; Maldon 15; Genesis A 2762-2763). Gelæsted has the meaning of accomplished, carried out, performed, but it also has the sense of lasted, endured. The boast lasted, held up through time, when it was realized in martial combat, when words and works ("wordum ond weorcum") were matched. The words of a boast were given vitality, endurance, when rooted in deeds. Conversely, past deeds and exploits were recreated, given new life and meaning when recollected and shaped into boastwords ("beotwordum"). Thus the boast existed in two moments of time: the moment of locution ("sprecen") and the moment of fulfillment ("gelæsted"). The binding contractual force of boasts is illustrated when in the midst of battle chieftains roused fainthearted warriors by reminding them of their former boasts (see Beowulf 2633-2637; Maldon 212-214). Death was better than the shame that would cleave to any man who turned back upon his boast.

So it is that the truth of a boast must be understood in the sense of troth. It is fruitless to question the truth of a boast in terms of predictive accuracy. When Beowulf boasted that he would use the gifc-sword Hrunting to slay Grendel's dam, he was incorrect because during the fight he was thwarted in attempts to use the sword. Likewise, if a warrior faced a hostile foe with the words, "I will prevail!" and then was defeated, his words would be false if viewed as a constative utterance. In both examples, however, the boasts were true in the sense that they were betrothals, commitments. The boast's function

was to wed the speaker to a course of action; in doing so, the boast became a prescriptive not descriptive or predictive utterance.

The first dramatically rendered boast in Beowulf will illustrate the peculiar shape of this genre of utterance. Even in Geatland (southern Sweden) the young Beowulf has heard how for twelve years Grendel has spoiled Heorot (the magnificent meadhall which was the cultural and political center of Danish life) and decimated the ranks of Danish strongmen. Seeing a contest with Grendel as a self-defining opportunity to measure his manhood, Beowulf journeys across the Baltic Sea to place his honor and his life on the line by challenging the monster whom no man has been able to withstand. Upon arrival he presents himself to the Danish court with this boast:

> Hail Hrothgar! I am the kinsman and thane of Hygelac. I have ventured upon many deeds of fame in my youth. The affair of Grendel was made known to me in my homeland. Seafarers tell that this meadhall, most splendid of buildings, stands vacant and useless to all men after the sun sinks beneath the cover of the sky. Therefore, my own people, wise counsellors, advised me thus, Lord Hrothgar, that I should come to your aid, because they know my prowess. They were there to observe when I came from battle, bloody from enemies, where I had vanquished and bound five men, destroyed a race of giants, and in the waves of the sea slew water-monsters at night, endured harsh distress, avenged a horde of troublemakers, utterly ground hateful foes to bits. And now against Grendel, the monster, the demon, I will alone settle the affair. . . . I have also heard say that the monster for his recklessness cares not for weapons; therefore, so that Hygelac, my liege lord, will be happy with me in his heart, I scorn to bear sword or broad shield, yellow wood, to battle, but with my grasp I will grapple with the fiend and fight for life, foe against foe; there must he trust the Lord's doom, the one whom death takes. I believe that if Grendel is able to accomplish it [slay me], he will feed fearlessly in the warhall upon the Geatish people, as he often did, upon the host of glorymen. You will have no need to make funeral arrangements for me, because he will have me shining with dripping blood if death takes me; he will bear away my bloody corpse, intending to savor it, the isolated one will dine without sorrowing, will stain the moorswamp with my blood; there will be no need for you to grieve or longer be concerned about my remains. . . . Fate ever goes as it must! (405-455)

Beowulf begins with a catalogue of past exploits, but ends with a commitment to future action. The archetypal structure of his boast is manifest in the movement <u>from</u> "I have ventured . . . vanquished . . . bound . . .'destroyed . . . slain . . . endured . . . avenged . . . ground to bits" <u>to</u> "I will." With the

ubi sunt formula deeply embedded in the Anglo-Saxon consciousness (see The Ruin, The Wanderer), Beowulf is keenly aware of the transitory nature of life and the mutability of all things. Past laurels will fade, all honor can be erased with a sudden loss of nerve. Through the boast he recharges his identity--recharge both in the sense of renewal and of laying once again upon himself a charge, a responsibility, an obligation.

Death was the only release from the obligations undertaken by the utterance of a boast. Perhaps that is why so many boasts contain a section where the speaker grapples with the real possibility of his failure and death in battle. Notice the length to which Beowulf discusses in graphic detail what will happen to him if Grendel is victorious. This symbolic confrontation with death functions as a stabilizing strategy, a socially acceptable way of coping with fear and doubt. The stiff-upper-lip ethos of the Anglo-Saxons would not have permitted any man to confide his fear and terror, though many of them must have been afraid because the literature is filled with scenes in which men lose their nerve in the face of death and flee. Through the bravado of a boast, however, a man could confront his mortality, steel himself against imminent violence, and exorcise unmanly fears. The language philosopher Georges Gusdorf points to this purging function of speech:

> Saint-Beuve, a man of letters, said that for a certain kind of mind, 'writing is deliverance.' Such is the way of the writer: the discipline of expression frees him from the spectres which haunt him. . . . Not all men write, but all resort to the power of expression in speech or in action to overcome inner threats. . . . The decision to express marks the threshold between the passivity of eating one's heart out and creative activity. To speak, to write, to express is to act, to survive crisis. . . . Expression is a kind of exorcism because it crystallizes the resolve not to let oneself go.

Caught in the snare of words, the terror of sudden violence and death could be wrestled with and controlled.

I believe that the boast as a verbal strategy for imparting continuity and significance to one's existence, persists beyond the Anglo-Saxon period. Even though we do not today have a speech ritual which we refer to as a boast, many discourses bear the chromosomal imprint of this ancient genre of utterance.

Let me give an example. When Gerald Ford stood before the 1976 Republican National Convention to accept the presidential nomination, he was in a crisis situation. He was more than 30 percentage points behind Carter in the polls. His own party did not see him as an aggressive leader and almost denied him the nomination. He responded to this moment of truth by uttering what I identify as a boast:

> Let's look at the record since August, 1974. Inflation has been cut in half. Payrolls are up, profits are up, production is up, purchases are up.
>
> Confidence has returned. . . .
>
> I called for an up-to-date powerful Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps. . . .
>
> From the start my administration has been open, candid, forthright. . . . I learned to listen . . . I have met with thousands of citizens . . . I have demanded honesty, decency, and personal integrity from everybody. . . . For the next four years, I pledge to you that I will hold to the steady course we have begun.
>
> But I have no intention of standing on the record alone. We will continue winning the fight against inflation. We will go on reducing the deadweight and the impudence of bureaucracy. We will submit a balanced budget by 1978. . . .
>
> God helping me, I will not let you down.

Many commentators said this was the best speech of Ford's political life. I explain the rousing effect not in terms of what he said (much of it is pedestrian and unimaginative), but because he cast his speech in the primal boast form which gave it the resonance of timeless heroism.

Perhaps the most widespread contemporary manifestation of boasting is the job applicant's <u>vita</u> (interesting that this discourse takes its name from the Latin word for life). The <u>vita</u> is clearly a summoning forth of past achievements for the charting of future action. The <u>vita</u> strategically selects and shapes the past so that it "promises" the future. Much as Beowulf proudly stated his lineage, "I am Hygelac's kinsman and thane," academicians declare their line of descent with statements like, "Ph.D., Harvard University." Beowulf listed martial exploits, academicians call forth intellectual feats, e.g., degrees earned, research grants obtained, publications accepted, courses taught, etc.

No one, however, interprets this list of past accomplishments as simply a celebration of self. The presentation of personal history in a vita implies a pledge to perform in a worthy way in some future situation. Unlike his Anglo-Saxon counterpart, the job-seeker of today frequently has difficulty finding an audience who will accept his promise.

Instead of a quaint rhetorical relic peculiar to Dark Age Anglo-Saxons, the boast, I suggest, is a enduring universal organizing principle of discourse. One of the constants of the human condition is the need to organize experience by creating a usable past from the myriad events that swirl about us. The boast is one of the cultural resources available to man, the speaking animal, for giving meaning and continuity to existence. The boast is a particular illumination of Hannah Arendt's general discussion of the "primordial link" between speech and action:

> Without the accompaniment of speech . . . action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject, as it were; not acting men but performing robots would achieve what, humanly speaking, would remain incomprehensible. Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words. The action he begins is humanly disclosed by the word, and though his deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do.[14] (emphasis min

Notes

[1]Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1978), p. 133.

[2]Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action (SCA Publication, 1977), p. 18 ff.

[3]The Philosophy of Literary Form, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973), p. 2.

[4]A notable exception is Theodore Otto Windt, "The Diatribe: Last Resort for Protest," QJS, 59 (1972), 1-14.

[4a]"Old English Beot and Old Icelandic Heitstrenging," PMLA, 49 (1934), 975-993; rpt. in Essential Articles for the Study of Old English Poetry, eds. Jess B. Bessinger, Jr., and Stanley J. Kahrl (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1968), 99-123.

[5]All citations from Beowulf are from Friedrich Klaeber's 3rd ed. (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1950). All other references to Old English poetry are from George P. Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, eds., The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, 6 vols. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1931-1953). Line numbers will be indicated in text. All translations from the Old English are my own.

[6]See Albert Keiser, The Influence of Christianity on the Vocabulary of Old English Poetry, Univ. of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, 5 (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1918).

[7]W.W. Skeat, ed., AElfric's Lives of Saints, Early English Text Society, 82 (1881), p. 356.

[8]I borrow the metaphor from Edwin Black, "Electing Time," QJS, 59 (1973), 128.

[8a]Cited from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 473. I am indebted to Wallace Bacon for pointing me to this speech.

[9]J.L. Austin, How To Do Things With Words (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), p. 3.

[10]John Searle, Speech Acts (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), p. 68.

[11]Austin, p. 2.

[12]ibid., p. 15.

[13]Speaking, trans. Paul T. Brockelman (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1965), p. 73.

[14]The Human Condition (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 178-179.